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AUTHOR Burton, Louise; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Thirty-four teachers of severely handicapped students were asked to rate frequency of 10 communication/collaboration areas (illness, attendance, medication, health issues, hygiene/grooming, clothing/supplies, transportation, after-school programming, Individualized Education Program goals, and discipline). Teachers were also asked to list the three areas they perceived as the most important. Illness, IEP development, attendance, clothing/supplies, and medication were topics of most frequent communication, although topics mentioned according to importance were discipline, IEP goals and health issues. Results indicated that teachers spent most of their time discussing with parents areas the teachers did not feel of highest priority. (CL)

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DEVELOPING NEW PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN PARENTS AND TEACHERS

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Session Leader

Louise Burton, Associate Professor
School of Education
California State University, San Bernardino

Presenters

Janice Chavez, Associate Professor
School of Education and Human Development
California State University, Fresno

Thomas Wojciehowski, Program Specialist
Special Education Resource Network - Region II
Riverside, California

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Developing New Partnerships Between Parents and Teachers

Historically parents have played an important role in the establishment of special education services for their handicapped children (Hallahan and Kaufman, 1982). Parents have taken the leadership in passage of mandatory legislation (P.L. 94-142) requiring parent participation in the evaluation, programming and placement activities for their handicapped child. Although "parent involvement" is required by law, the intent of P.L. 94-142 through the individual educational plan (IEP) is to have parents actively participating in their child's total program.

Parent-teacher involvement and communication has been interpreted in many ways. In a review of the literature, Beals and Beers (1982) reported three basic collaboration approaches between teachers and parents: (1) tell them what they need to know, (2) bring them in and put them to work, and (3) I talk, you talk, we talk. The latter approach, which involves open shared communication, is recommended. Evidence supports the notion, however, that professionals frequently resort to telling parents about problems or needs, particularly during the IEP process. For example, in a survey of 243 parents of handicapped children, Witt, Miller, McIntyre and Smith (1984) found parents' active involvement in the IEP process was not seen as a major goal. Additionally, Yoshida, Fenton, Maxwell and Kaufman (1978) surveyed 1500 educators regarding parent input at IEP meetings and found that the majority of the respondents preferred parents to hold the more passive

role (presenting and gathering information) over the active role (getting involved in the child's program). Yoshida et al. (1978) further revealed that parents and classroom teachers contribute the least to IEP meetings, which may relate to their dissatisfaction or misunderstanding of program decisions.

Effective collaboration depends on shared communication involving active listening and mutual respect for the needs of one another. Professionals must facilitate this collaboration by taking the leadership role in identifying priority needs and implementing communication procedures. Little information is currently available concerning specific topics which parents and teachers perceive as important. Recognition of these communication needs may serve as a basis for developing effective parent-teacher collaboration efforts. In the case of the severely handicapped student, parent-teacher collaboration is particularly critical.

This survey examined the opinions of teachers of severely handicapped students toward ten communication topic areas. Teachers were asked to rate the frequency of parent-teacher contacts and to list three collaboration areas they perceived as most important. Additional comments were solicited from the teachers for each topic area as well as suggestions for other areas to be included in future surveys.

Sample

The sample for this study included 34 full-time teachers of severely handicapped students in southern California. Personal data

which were obtained from the teachers indicated that the average special education experience was 8.5 years. The number of classroom aides ranged from one to three, with a mean of 1.25 per teacher. The 34 teachers are directly responsible for a total of 379 severely handicapped students, an average of 12.3 students per teacher.

Data were gathered regarding the home placement of each severely handicapped student. The greatest number of students were living at home, 261 students. Fifty-one students resided in foster home settings and 42 students were placed in Regional Intermediate Care Facilities for Developmentally Disabled. Twenty-four students resided in board- d-care or group home settings. One student lived with grandparents.

Method

Data were collected through use of the Communication/Collaboration Survey Form (CCS). The CCS is composed of a series of ten communication-collaboration areas: illness, attendance, medication, health issues, hygiene/grooming, clothing/supplies, transportation, after school programming, IEP goals, and discipline. Thirty-four teachers were randomly selected and interviewed by trained graduate students who recorded their responses on the CCS. The teachers were asked to react to each of the ten topics by rating their perception of the frequency of communication/collaboration. Responses were based on a Likert-type rating scale ranging from seldom (1) to frequent (5). In addition, teachers were asked to provide comments related to each topic and to suggest three important communication/collaboration areas they

felt were most important.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Teacher ratings of their level of communication among the ten collaboration topics were collapsed for analysis with 1 and 2 representing the "seldom category," and 4 and 5 representing the "frequent category." Percentages of teachers responding in the frequent category were ranked from high to low. Table I provides a summary of percentages of teacher ratings in the categories and rankings derived from the "frequent category" regarding the ten collaboration areas.

Teachers were also asked to list three collaboration areas they perceived as most important. The following topics were identified most often by the majority of the teachers.

1. Discipline
2. IEP Goals
3. Health Issues
4. Hygiene/Grooming
5. Home Programming
6. Parent Involvement in School
7. Positive Attitudes
8. Parenting Skills

Comparisons were made between what teachers perceive as topic areas most frequently discussed with parents and those which teachers felt were most important for teacher-parent communication. An analysis of rankings revealed that illness, IEP development, attendance, clothing-supplies, and medication were topics of most frequent communication. When teachers were asked to list the three areas most important to parents and teachers, the topics frequently mentioned were discipline, IEP goals and health issues. A discrepancy exists between what teachers

TABLE I

Communication/Collaboration Between Teachers and Care Providers of Severely Handicapped Students

Teachers' Ratings of Collaboration Level	Categories			
	Frequent 5 + 4 %	3 %	Seldom 2 + 1 %	No Response 0 %
1. Illness	64.6	20.5	14.6	
2. Attendance	55.8	20.5	23.5	
3. Medication	44.0	17.6	38.1	
4. Seizures/Health	44.0	20.5	35.2	
5. Hygiene/Grooming	35.2	38.2	26.4	
6. Clothing/Supplies/Materials	55.8	17.6	29.3	
7. Transportation	23.5	23.5	52.9	
8. After School Programming	23.4	14.7	29.3	2.9
9. IEP Goals	61.7	11.7	23.4	2.9
10. Discipline	35.2	32.3	32.3	

Teacher Communication-Collaboration Rankings	
1. Illness	64.6%
2. IEP Goals	61.7%
3. Attendance	55.8%
4. Clothing/Supplies/Material	55.8%
5. Medication	44.0%
6. Seizures/Health	44.0%
7. Hygiene/Grooming	35.2%
8. Discipline	35.2%
9. Transportation	23.5%
10. After School Programming	23.4%

frequently discuss with parents and what they feel are imporant areas for discussion. Teachers indicated discipline, health issues and hygiene/grooming as areas of most importance. On the other hand, when teachers were asked to rate their communication level, these three topics were less frequently discussed with parents. Teachers, however, agreed on their perceived importance of IEP goals and the frequency (61.7%) of discussions with parents on this topic.

It is apparent from the results that teachers spend most of their time discussing with parents areas they do not feel are of highest priority to them. To identify the gap between what teachers are doing and what they feel they should be doing is important to initiating an effective parent-teacher collaboration program. An extension of this study to include parents could also reveal essential information on specific areas parents frequently communicate with teachers about and what areas they would like to discuss with teachers.

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